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Mexico's Hidden Tragedy

The most efficient way a government can hide horrors within its borders is simply to deny access to reporters and representatives of humanitarian organizations.

Thus official stonewalling has been the Mexican government's chosen defense against charges that thousands of helpless Guatemalan refugees are living like concentration camp inmates or hunted animals in the jungles of southern Mexico.

The human suffering among the estimated 100,000 Guatemalans, most of whom are Indian peasants, has been going on since 1980, when the refugees first began fleeing across the border to escape the cross fire between leftist guerrillas and the rightist Guatemalan government.

There are about 90 refugee camps along the border, a region that can be reached only in small planes and boats or on foot over many miles of mountain and jungle trails. In short, it is not an area where outsiders can penetrate without official cooperation—and the Mexican authorities have outlawed cooperation.

Only under extreme behind-the-scenes pressure from Washington did the Mexican government allow the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to set up an office in Mexico in 1982 and dispense U.S.-financed relief supplies to the camps. But for months after, the Mexicans refused to let American relief officials visit the camps. Finally, last April, a small team of U.S. observers was allowed in.

From sources who have been allowed into some of the refugee camps, as well as State Department, CIA and other intelligence sources, my associates John Dillon and Dale Van Atta have been able to pierce the curtain Mexico has thrown up to hide the misery of the Guatemalan refugees.

By way of background, a State Department official pointed out that Mexico has a long and honorable history of granting asylum to foreigners. But they were the sort of people who, if they didn't escape with their assets intact, at least arrived in Mexico with the skills and education to make a living. The wretched Guatemalan Indians, on the other hand, bring nothing but hunger and homelessness. They are uneducated, illiterate peasants who have

left behind their only means of survival: their farmland.

And the Guatemalans crossed the border in numbers that soon overwhelmed local Mexican authorities. Despite the rigors of the jungle refugee trails, which may have claimed as many as 5,000 victims, Guatemalans poured into the Mexican jungle state of Chiapas by the tens of thousands.

Even those who made it to the makeshift refugee camps found their suffering wasn't necessarily over. Guatemalan vigilante gangs cross the border to attack the helpless refugees.

Tales of brutality by the Mexican army have not been much prettier. Besides rapes, beatings, mass arrests, home burnings and extortion, several unsolved murders have been attributed to the refugees' supposed protectors.

An American allowed to visit the camps last April said the Mexican government "has done a creditable job given the logistics of the situation." He was referring to the difficulty of delivering food to the isolated camps whose population has swelled to 46,000 in less than four years, and to the insoluble problem of caring

for some 50,000 who have avoided the camps and tried to survive in the jungles or in the tiny Indian villages.

One reason many of the refugees avoid the camps is the Mexican government's policy of forced relocation to camps farther from the dangerous border area, 125 miles northeast in the Campeche state on the Yucatan peninsula.

Though the relocation is theoretically for the Indians' own protection—getting them away from the Guatemalan government raiders—about 10,000 of the refugees have resisted a move so far from their homeland. So the Mexican authorities have been using force to remove these "dissidents" from Chiapas.

When they arrive in Campeche, the refugees are at least safe. But conditions in the new camps are far from ideal.

For example, an Austrian woman writing a report for a San Antonio group called South Texas Aid to Refugees described "a huge metal hall, as gigantic as the railway station of a big city [in which lay] thousands of people on the floor."

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